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SUBJECT: LEBANON: GEAGEA WARNS DAS HALE THAT ISRAEL IS
STRENGTHENING HIZBALLAH, DESCRIBES MARCH 14 DIVISIONS

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In an August 29 meeting with visiting NEA DAS David Hale, Lebanese Forces (LF) leader Samir Geagea stressed the importance of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian issue to facilitate resolution of other regional issues. He said Israel is making a huge mistake by publicly criticizing the Lebanese government instead of Hizballah's Syrian suppliers. Geagea said the U.S. could be most helpful to Lebanon by keeping up pressure on Iran and Syria, and said an indictment by Special Tribunal for Lebanon by the end of the year would be good for March 14's election chances.

¶2. (C) Geagea claimed divisions within March 14 were not among its Christian leaders, but between Saad Hariri and his coalition partners. He was confident parliament would pass an electoral law by the end of September, and that the cabinet would appoint the new army commander soon, but asked for USG support for his choice for the G-2 Director of Military Intelligence. Looking at the opposition, Geagea believed there would be no way to put a wedge between Michel Aoun and Hizballah. (The cabinet chose Gen. Jean Kahwagi is the new army commander later that day.) End summary.

NO PALESTINIAN NATURALIZATION

¶3. (C) Visiting NEA DAS David Hale, accompanied by Ambassador, NEA/ELA Lebanon Desk Officer, and PolOffs met with Samir Geagea on August 29 at his home in Maarab. Geagea, noting warmly that DAS Hale was the last diplomat to see him before his imprisonment in 1994, began by insisting on the fundamental importance of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and determining the fate of the Palestinian refugees, particularly those in Lebanon. He said he hoped the next administration would tackle the issue seriously. He worried that some in Lebanon were in favor of the naturalization of the Palestinians in Lebanon. He told Hale that the USG should speak out against this idea.

¶4. (C) DAS Hale agreed that resolving the Israeli-Palestinian issue was crucial to peace and security in the region, and told Geagea that the Administration is working very hard on it in its final months in office. He

explained the USG view in the Middle East, that Iran is an overarching threat to many friends in the region, including Lebanon, Iraq, Israel, and the Palestinians. Geagea insisted that resolution for the Palestinians would make dealing with Iran easier; "You can't have peace when there are people living without a state," he said.

"WE CANNOT STOP THE WEAPONS"

15. (C) Geagea said Israel was making a huge mistake in threatening the Lebanese militarily. He maintained that the recent Lebanese ministerial statement, which prompted Israeli criticism, was "ten times better" than the previous statement from 2005, and yet the Israelis insisted on threatening the Lebanese state based on the rhetoric of Hizballah. Hizballah had lost a lot of ground politically in May, he said, but the prisoner exchange the Israelis negotiated with them gave them legitimacy. The continued threats, he said, merely make Hizballah stronger.

16. (C) DAS Hale explained the deep pessimism he perceived among Israeli officials and Israel Defense Forces (IDF) officers, saying the IDF found the weapons flow to Hizballah alarming. He said the Israelis perceived a "creeping" Hizballah power grab from the state, and they viewed Doha as a Hizballah victory. He told Geagea that the Israelis needed to see something tangible to slow the flow of weapons.

17. (C) "We cannot," said Geagea. "That does not mean we do not want to, but we cannot. Siniora moved one guy from the

BEIRUT 00001273 002 OF 003

airport in May, and look what happened. What will they do if we try to move people at the border? The Lebanese are willing but not able. The Syrians are able but not willing. Why are the Israelis not threatening them? Why do they threaten us? They are hurting the good forces in Lebanon."

18. (C) DAS Hale asked Geagea his thoughts on recent French overtures to Damascus. Geagea shrugged, saying that maybe overall it is not a bad thing. They should do their experiment, the Syrians will not deliver, and then no one will be able to say it had not been tried, he said. Asked what he thought the French objective was, Geagea replied, "They want a bigger role."

SPECIAL TRIBUNAL INDICTMENTS,
MARCH 14 CHRISTIANS KEY TO ELECTIONS

19. (C) Turning to the spring 2009 elections, Geagea reiterated that Israel should put more pressure on Syria. "Without Syria, there is no Hizballah." He asked what kind of progress there was on the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. DAS Hale and the Ambassador replied that it was becoming operational and that UNIIIC was gathering evidence for potential indictments. Geagea said that indictments would be good for the March 14 coalition, particularly if the timing was right, before the end of 2008. He told Hale that the most important thing the U.S. could do in advance of the elections was to stay tough with Syria and Iran.

110. (C) Asked whether March 14 was managing to work together effectively and stay unified, Geagea said that some party leaders in March 14 refused to give seats to the parties delivering the votes for the March 14 bloc. While there had been a few disagreements between Geagea and Kataeb leader Amine Gemayel ("They refuse to acknowledge their actual size," he complained), he maintained that the Christians in March 14 were largely united. Saad Hariri, he said, was causing the problems. "Hizballah delivered the Christian part of its gains to Aoun. Our partners (meaning Saad) are not delivering to us. Saad says 'I refuse to be a Sunni leader. I want to be a multi-confessional leader.' He can't! He needs to give us seats in the Christian parts of

Sunni areas."

¶11. (C) Geagea was confident that parliament would pass the new electoral law by the end of September. However, he was pessimistic about the National Dialogue, saying that talk of expansion of the dialogue participation was merely a delaying tactic.

RESIGNED TO KAHWAGI AS ARMY COMMANDER,
FOCUSED ON G-2 INTELLIGENCE SLOT

¶12. (C) Geagea predicted the cabinet would vote in General Jean Kahwagi as Commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). Geagea said he did not know Qahwaji and so the LF ministers would not vote for him, but they would not object to his appointment. (Note: The Cabinet did approve Kahwagi's appointment later the same day. Geagea's two ministers abstained, as did the two ministers of another March 14 leader, Walid Jumblatt. End note.)

¶13. (C) Geagea said he was very concerned, however, about the appointment of the LAF G-2 Director of Military Intelligence, which should happen within a few days of Kahwagi's appointment. He claimed there were three candidates remaining for the position: Joseph Njeim, Albert Karam, and Maroun Hitti. Njeim, he said, was out of the running, because "too many people do not like him." Albert Karam, he said, is incompetent, with a temperament that is not sufficiently tough for the job. Geagea said Maroun Hitti was a tough officer, the right one for the job, and that he had convinced PM Siniora of this. Geagea pushed for USG support for Hitti.

AOUN AND HIZBALLAH

BEIRUT 00001273 003 OF 003

¶13. (C) At the close of the meeting, DAS Hale asked Geagea about General Michel Aoun's popularity in Lebanon, and the nature of his relationship with Hizballah. Geagea said that Aoun is not as popular as one might think, that his popularity had actually reached a low. Nonetheless, he said Aoun will always have a base of supporters who will stay with him regardless of how he performs. Geagea said he thought Aoun was firmly allied with Hizballah. "I thought at first it was tactical, just to get the presidency, but now he is totally there."

¶14. (U) DAS Hale has cleared this cable.

SISON